*Question 3*

*For centuries readers of Sappho’s songs have made no distinction between the poet Sappho and the speaking subject of the songs (the lyrical I). Also today many scholars still implicitly consider Sappho’s song to be personal or even autobiographical. Yet we must keep in mind that the songs were intended for public performance and needed to answer to genre expectation. Do you find first-person references that express this tension? How would you evaluate the opinion that Sappho was speaking on behalf of a community (‘representative I’)?*

Helpful Quotes from Introduction:

* “Two further points should be taken into account in assessing these ancient records. First, ancient scholars, like modern ones, had a tendency to identify all first-person speakers in Sappho’s poetry with the poet herself and to read her work autobiographically. We will see that there are good reasons to be skeptical about such a reading of Sappho’s songs” (2).
* The cultic hymns suggest that Sappho was a respected member of her community. Otherwise it would be inconceivable that she was granted the honor of writing songs for the gods. Most of these hymns were choral songs, meant to be performed in public (9).
* “In fragment 16, for example, when the first-person speaker says that she misses Anaktoria and desires to see her, she acts as a representative of the audience, inspiring the same longing in them. In that case, it does not make much difference for the understanding of the song whether the speaker is Sappho, a chorus, or another woman.” (11-12).
* “The cultic hymns suggest that Sappho was a respected member of her community. Otherwise it would be inconceivable that she was granted the honor of writing songs for the gods. Most of these hymns were choral songs, meant to be performed in public. It is notable that they are mostly hymns to female deities. Ancient Greece was a segregated society, in which women publicly worshipped the female gods in particular. They were encouraged to see their own lives reflected in these deities’ different manifestations: a Greek woman’s life could be described as a transition from the state of Artemis ( parthenos , or girl) to Aphrodite ( numphê , or marriageable young woman) to Hera ( gunê , or wife) and Demeter ( mêtêr , or mother). Sappho composed songs for performances at festivals of all these goddesses” (9).
* Four modern reconstructions of Sappho dominate the literature about her: Sappho the chorus organizer, Sappho the teacher, Sappho the priestess, and Sappho the banqueter. Of these four the suggestion that she led young women’s choruses is the most plausible, because it agrees best with the testimonia , her fragments, and the historical period in which she lived. This could mean that more of her poetry was composed for public performances than is generally recognized. However, there is also evidence of solo performances and of songs that may have been composed for more intimate occasions” (14-15).
* “There is no evidence that Sappho performed a religious function, such as that of priestess. It is true, of course, that an archaic Greek chorus did have a religious purpose (as noted earlier). In this sense the idea that Sappho led a religious community is compatible with her role as a composer and instructor of young women’s choruses” (15-16).

Pronouns in Sappho’s lyrics and other key names:

* [1]: “I” x5 ; “me” x2 ; “my” x5 ; Mention of “Sappho” ; “you” x5 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [2]: “me” x 1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [3]: “I” x1 ; “me” x1 ; “my” x1 ; “you” x2
* [4]: “I” x1 ; “me” x1
* [5]: Mention of “Brother” ; “my” x1 ; “you” x2 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [6]: “we” x1
* [8]: “I” x1 ; Mention of “Atthis”
* [9]: “I” x2 ; “you’ x1
* [15]: “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [16]: “I” x2 ; “me” x1 ; Mention of “Anaktoria” ; “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [17]: “we” x1 ; “you” x1
* [18]: “my” x1
* [19]: “we” x1
* [16A]: “I” x1 ; “me” x1
* [22]: “I” x4 ; Mention of “Gongyla” ; “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [23]: “I” x1 ; “me” x1 ; “my” x1 ; “you” x3
* [24]: “we” x2 ; “you” x1
* [26]: “I” x2 ; “me” x1 ; “my” x1 ; “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [27]: “you” x1
* [30]: “we” x1
* [31]: “I” x4 ; “me” x1 ; “my” x6 ; “you” x3
* [32]: “me” x1
* [33]: “I” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [36]: “I” x2
* [37]: “my” x1
* [38]: “you” x1
* [40]: “I” x2 ; “you” x2
* [41]: “my” x1; “you” x1
* [43]: “my” x1
* [44A]: “I” x1 ; “my” x1
* [45]: “you” x1
* [46]: “I” x1 ; “my” x1
* [47]: “my” x1
* [48]: “I” x1 ; “my” x1 ; “you” x2
* [49A]: “I” x1 ; Mention of “Atthis”
* [49B]: “me” x1 ; “you” x1
* [51]: “I” x1
* [52]: “I” x1
* [55]: “you” x1
* [56]: “I” x1
* [pre-58 Oxyrhynchos]: “my” x1 ; “you” x1
* [pre-58 Cologne]: “I” x5
* [58]: “I” x6 ; “me” x1 ; “my” x3
* [60]: “I” x1 ; “me” x1 ; “my” x2 ; “you” x2
* [62]: “you” x2
* [63]: “I” x4 ; “you” x1
* [65]: Mention of “Sappho” ; “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [67]: “you” x1
* [68] Mention of “Megara” ; “me” x1
* [70]: “I” x1
* [71]: “I” x1 ; Mention of “Mika” ; “you” x2
* [73]: Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [76]: “I” x1
* [86]: “I” x1 ; “my” x2 ; “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [88]: “I” x4 ; “me” x1 ; “you” x4
* [90]: “I” x1 ; “me” x1 ; “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [92]: “I” x1
* [94]: “I” x3 ; “me” x4 ; Mention of “Sappho” ; “my” x2 ; “we” x3 ; “you” x6
* [95]: “I” x2 ;”me” x1; Mention of “Gongyla”
* [96]: Mention of “Atthis” ; “we” x1 ; “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [98]: “I” x1 ; Mention of “Kleïs” ; Mention of “Mother” ; “my” x1
* [99B]: “I” x1
* [101]: Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [102]: “I” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [103B]: “me” x1
* [104A]: “you” x2
* [107]: “I” x1
* [109]: “we” x1
* [111]: “you” x1
* [112}: “you” x4 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [114]: “I” x1 ; “me” x1 ; “my” x1 ; “you” x1
* [115]: “I” x2; “you” x1
* [117]: “you” x1
* [118]: “me” x1
* [120]: “I” x1
* [121]: “I” x1 ; “my” x1 ; “you” x1
* [122]: Mention of “Sappho”
* [124]: “you” x1
* [125]: “I” x1
* [126]: “you” x1
* [129]: “me” x2 ; “you” x2
* [131]” “me” x1 ; Mention of “Atthis” ; Mention of “Andromeda” ; “you” x1
* [133]: Mention of “Sappho” ; “you” x1 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [132]: “I” x2 ; Mention of “Kleïs”
* [134]: “I” x1 ; “you” ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [137]: “I” x1 ; “you” x3
* [138]: “me” x1
* [140]: “we” x1 ; ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [146]: “me” x1
* [147]: “I” x1
* [155]: “my” x1
* [159]: “me” x1 ; “my” x1 (Aphrodite speaking) ; “you” x2 ; Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [160]: “I” x1 ; “my” x1
* [163]: “my” x1
* [168B]: “I” x1
* [169]: “I” x1
* [182]: “I” x1
* [213]: “me” x1
* [214C]: Mention of “Atthis”
* [A 254]: “me” x1
* [A 255]: “me” x1
* [A 259]: “you” x2
* [S/A 18]: “I” x1
* [S/A 23]: Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [S/A 25]: “I” x1
* [256]: Mention of “Atthis”
* [261]: Mention of “Aphrodite”
* [Brothers Song]: “I” x1 ; mention of “Charaxos” and “Larichos” ; “me” x1 ; “you” x1

Notes while reading:

* Can other pronouns be used to signify something about speaker as autobiographical “I” vs “representative I” ? What about names? See listing above
* Can the imaginative addressee from the speaker tell us something? See “I” addressing deities at times, which might be of interest to a representative group rather than just the historical Sappho
* Attention to “I” speaking to/about Aphrodite; this might possibly signify moments of public performance, especially based on notes about Sappho and cult of Aphrodite
* Tension between private desires for specific people, reflections on (apparent) historical family members and general reflections on desire (using certain deities, at times, to do so). Should it be evaluated based on how many “specific” or seemingly “personal” details are given? What can addressing deities tell us?
* Note from Appendix on “Brothers Song”: “The first person speaker in the song may be identified with Sappho; her addressee appears to be a family member. Obbink suggests that she may be Sappho’s mother, but another possibility is her third brother Eurygios or Erygios (see the Introduction, p. 3)” (162).
* “I” can also be understood at times as an “implicit I” who speaks as a god/goddess (such as in selection 1) in which “Sappho” has a discussion with said god/goddess. This seems to create a tension – possibly author Sappho using a speaking god as benefit for others, but also concerns (somewhat) specific details about desire

**“Ceci n’est pas un fragment”: Identity, Intertextuality and Fictionality in Sappho’s “Brothers Poem”**

* “The first recorded reference outside Sappho to a man called Charaxus is to be found in Herodotus’ *Histories*: according to an anecdote narrated at Hdt. 2.135, the notorious courtesan Rhodopis

came to Egypt as Xanthus of Samos took her there, but, after having come there for work, she was ransomed for a lot of money by a man from Mytilene: Charaxus, the son of Skamandronymus, the brother of the songwriter Sappho.

However, as Charaxus was unable to keep Rhodopis for himself (Herodotus allusively remarks that “she became free and stayed in Egypt”), it happened that “when Charaxus returned to Mytilene, having ransomed Rhodopis, Sappho taunted him massively in a song”. The same story, enriched with supplements and variations, is retold by numerous later authors such as Poseidippus, Ovid, Strabo and Athenaeus.” (10)

* The name of Larichus, in contrast, is first attested as late as Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophistae* (second/third century AD) and is mentioned again in a few later testimonies. According to Athen. 10.425, in a passage discussing examples of “celebrities” who once worked as cupbearers in their youth, “in many places the beautiful Sappho praises her brother Larichus for pouring wine in the *prytaneion* for the Mytileneans”. The statement that she “in many places praises” him (πολλαχοῦ […] ἐπαινεῖ) suggests several Sapphic poems as points of reference for this piece of information.” (10-11)
* “Finally, we should bear in mind that ancient historiography, biographical writing and literary criticism had a very strong tendency towards the biographical interpretation of literary texts. Biographers and literary critics would, as a rule, not hesitate to identify the first-person speaker or narrator of a fictional text with its flesh-and-blood author, and it was very common to use literary texts in order to extrapolate biographical information about their authors.” (12)
* “In my view, we may firmly conclude only that the BP testifies to the biographical tradition of Charaxus and Larichus as Sappho’s brothers having its roots, in one way or another, in Sappho’s poetry; in addition to this, it confirms, once more, the biographical approach that ancient biographers and critics used to take towards poetry and poets. This caveat does, of course, not eliminate the possibility that the three may in reality have been siblings and that the BP may reflect actual “family business”; however, it is important to acknowledge that there is no conclusive evidence for such a presumption, and that our newest finding does not fundamentally change this picture.” (12-13­)
* The “I”-question, in turn, is connected to what is generally (and, one may add: sweepingly) known as a quarrel between a “pragmatic” and a “literary” school. In short, the pragmatic school is contextual by arguing that Sappho’s poetry was composed for, and performed within, specific social contexts, and that all persons involved – that is, author/speaker, addressee(s), and any person(s) mentioned in a poem – were, in one way or another, present (or at least imagined to be present) on these occasions. In contrast, the literary approach is textual, inasmuch as it concentrates on the literary, fictional status of the poetic world and the imagined reality created by and within a poetic universe – which, in consequence, allows (various) fictional(ised) poetic speakers with oscillating identities to be suggested.” (13)
* “I would like to suggest that Sappho may deliberately have chosen to alienate her name in her poems in order to draw attention to the partial (but not total) overlap between her real self and her role(s) as a poetic speaker.” (14)
* In short, I suggest that we read the “I” in the BP as the voice of Sappho – or, as that of “Psappho” – who evokes a certain context and setting, but that we are wary of reconstructing an actual event or specific circumstances in Sappho’s life through this setting; rather, we should acknowledge that any implied context is, first and foremost, a parameter within the poem’s fictional world.” (14-15)

*ESSAY: For centuries readers of Sappho’s songs have made no distinction between the poet Sappho and the speaking subject of the songs (the lyrical I). Also today many scholars still implicitly consider Sappho’s song to be personal or even autobiographical. Yet we must keep in mind that the songs were intended for public performance and needed to answer to genre expectation. Do you find first-person references that express this tension? How would you evaluate the opinion that Sappho was speaking on behalf of a community (‘representative I’)?*

Many modern and ancient literary critics have viewed Sappho’s songs as private, autobiographical musings. By examining first-person pronouns and selective proper nouns (such as “Sappho” in fragments 1, 65, 94, and 133), these critics often conflate the poetic speaker with the poet herself. More recently, this approach has been criticized by those who notice the songs’ (more likely) public settings. In this essay, I explore how recent hypothesizes on Sappho’s public performance context influence perceptions of representation and autobiography in the songs.

The common assumption that first-person speakers in Sappho’s songs function autobiographically greatly influences perceptions on how the songs were originally performed. Historically, many scholars have assumed that Sappho“composed songs […] to be performed *by herself*” (Lardinois 151 my emphasis) in small, intimate (or private) settings. In *Sappho and Alcaeus,* Denys Page says "[t]here is nothing to contradict the *natural* supposition that […] all or almost all of [Sappho’s] poems were recited by herself informally to her companions” (Qtd. in Lardinois 152, my emphasis). To his credit, Denys (and most scholars) does acknowledge that some of Sappho’s religious hymns and wedding songs were most likely chorally performed and, therefore, public settings (though these, according to him, act as exceptions and are very limited in number).

Page’s view has been challenged by scholars such as André Lardinois. Lardinois upholds that “solo performances [of Sappho’s songs] for more intimate occasions” (15) are much more unlikely than public performances. For support, he looks to ancient testimonia, noting that “no one in antiquity says [Sappho did solo performances in a small circle of her companions], not even Horace, who makes Sappho sing to her own lyre in the underworld” (Lardinois 154). Additionally, Lardinois believes Sappho was (most likely) a leader of women’s choruses, for this position “agrees best with the testimonia, [Sappho’s] fragments, and the historical period in which she lived.” (14-15). If this is true, the likelihood that many of her songs were publicly performed would only increase.

Lardinois also challenges traditional autobiographical approaches to personal pronouns and proper nouns in the songs. As stated, these signifiers have commonly been conflated with the historical author Sappho herself. This practice seems to go back centuries as “ancient historiography, biographical writing and literary criticism had a very strong tendency towards the biographical interpretation of literary texts” (BAR). With this in mind, the factuality of all ancient testimonia on the historic Sappho – a key source for justifying autobiographical approaches – is called into question. According to Lardinois, personal pronouns and key proper nouns more plausibly represent Sappho’s collective female community.

This representative quality can be seen even in the most contentious of fragments. For example, fragment 1 – “Hymn to Aphrodite” – is often cited as an example of autobiography in the songs. It includes the personal pronouns “I” (x5), “me” (x2), “my” (x5), and “you” (x5), along with direct mentions of the names “Sappho” and “Aphrodite.” In this unique prayer-like-song, the speaker “I” (who is named “Sappho” by Aphrodite) requests Aphrodite to “come.” In Aphrodite’s response, the reader becomes aware that this “coming” simultaneously includes a request for Aphrodite to “persuade” an unnamed person to “turn back” to “Sappho’s” love. This unique mentioning of “Sappho” – which only occurs in three other fragments – leads traditionalists to assume the historic Sappho (at one point) desired another who did not want her back.

While the invocation of “Sappho” might make the representative stance more difficult to see, Lardinois nevertheless notes its place.

Another tension filled fragment is number 16. Here, the first person speaker directly invokes personal pronouns and the name “Anaktoria,” leading many to assume this is the historic Sappho confessing her desire for a historic Anaktoria. However, looking at the songs (most probable) public performance context, changes how this song can be perceived. There is no evidence Sappho herself (let alone a soloist) sang this song. Lardinois adds, “when the first-person speaker says that she misses Anaktoria and desires to see her, she acts as a representative of the audience, inspiring the same longing in them. In that case, it does not make much difference for the understanding of the song whether the speaker is Sappho, a chorus, or another woman” (11-12). Additionally, this song “adopts a feminine perspective” that “speaks for all the women in the audience, not only for Sappho.” (171)

Its possible that some of these songs were sung by Sappho (though, as mentioned, not inherently about her own private emotions), but a systematic deciphering of which would have been done so is essentially impossible to hypothesize on. As mentioned, Sappho’s marriage songs and religious hymns are generally understood to be choral performances. At the same time, their meter is not clearly distinguished from songs assumed to be monodic. For example, fragments 27, 30, and 1 follow the same Sapphic meter even though the former two have been commonly perceived as choral wedding songs, and the latter as monodic (Lardinois 164 NEW). Importantly, this uncertainty does not disrupt the likelihood of the songs being publicly performed: “whether Sappho, a chorus, or another soloist performed [the Sapphic songs], […] all three would be speaking with a public voice” (Lardinois 11).

*CONCLUSION*

It's possible that some of these songs were sung by Sappho (though, as mentioned, not inherently about her own private emotions), but a systematic deciphering of which would have been done so is essentially impossible to hypothesize on. As mentioned, Sappho’s marriage songs and religious hymns are generally understood to be choral performances. At the same time, their meter is not clearly distinguished from songs assumed to be monodic. For example, fragments 27, 30, and 1 follow the same Sapphic meter even though the former two have been commonly perceived as choral wedding songs, and the latter as monodic (Lardinois 164 NEW). Importantly, this uncertainty does not disrupt the likelihood of the songs being publicly performed: “whether Sappho, a chorus, or another soloist performed [the Sapphic songs], […] all three would be speaking with a public voice” (Lardinois 11).

By approaching these songs based on their (most likely) public performance setting,

As stated, many of the personal pronouns and proper nouns in the songs are still used to justify autobiographical readings and private performance contexts regardless of other evidence. Lardinois attempts to challenges this position by calling the factuality of ancient testimonia – a key source for autobiographical claims – into questions. He says,

this ancient testimonia is often used as a key source for justifying autobiographical approaches – and encourages the reader to perceive personal pronouns and selective proper nouns as representatives of Sappho’s collective female community rather than Sappho by herself.

Firstly, when separating speaker from author, “Sappho” the speakers can be understood as “a persona, with whom Sappho the poet/performer can disagree” (168 NEW).

seems to believe that Aphrodite will come to her and help, but “Sappho the composer and likely performer of the song may not” (168 NEW). Furthermore, “Sappho” the speaker acts as “a persona, with whom Sappho the poet/performer can disagree” (168 NEW).

As mentioned, it is already generally accepted that at least some of Sappho’s songs were choral, public performances (such as the marriage songs and religious hymns).

In his introduction to *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works*, Lardinois acknowledges the diversity of Sappho’s works; her extant poetry includes “songs about the erotic desire for women […], pieces of cultic hymns […], wedding songs […], satirical songs […], songs about Sappho’s family […], a song about old age […], and even an epic-like fragment” (8-9).

However, there is also evidence of solo performances and of songs that may have been composed for more intimate occasions” (14-15)

“I do not want to deny that Sappho and her companions may have recited songs to each other at her house, but this is by no means evident and, instead, there are good reasons to believe that Sappho composed her songs for public performances” (155)

Nevertheless, “it does not make much difference for the interpretation of her songs whether Sappho, a chorus, or another soloist performed them, as long as one accepts that all three would be speaking with a public voice (Lardinois 11)”

“Some of Sappho's poems seem to have been intended to be recited by herself, like fragment 1, in which she mentions her own name, but such clarity is exceptional: the only other fragments in which Sappho mentions her name are 65, 94, and 133. We cannot be absolutely certain that she sang even these songs herself.” (153)

In fragment 16, for example, when the first-person speaker says that she misses Anaktoria and desires to see her, she acts as a representative of the audience, inspiring the same longing in them. In that case, it does not make much difference for the understanding of the song whether the speaker is Sappho, a chorus, or another woman. (11-12)